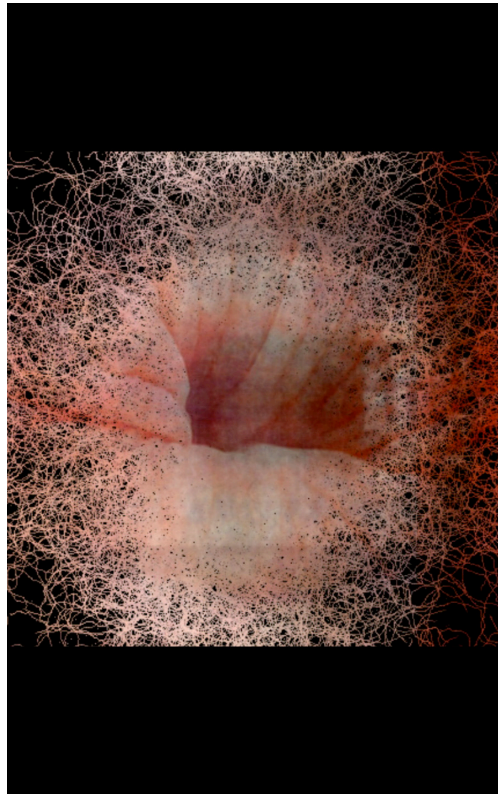


Emergence of the New Paradigm: *Viractuality*

Artist talk by Joseph Nechvatal delivered Monday, February 21st, 2011 at 4:30 pm at the Albin O. Kuhn Library Gallery at Dresher Center for the Humanities, University of Maryland, Baltimore County

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Joseph Nechvatal, *sOuth pOle* (2011) 112x168 cm

This talk will investigate the idea of the emergence of the *viractual* era, which I maintain is already upon us. First, I will formulate an argument for what the *viractual* is and what *viractualism* is about.

As I work on this idea in my own work, I will illustrate my argument with examples from my own art practice, but by no means is the concept of viractualism limited to my art activity alone. On the contrary, it is a widely used technique, even if it has not yet been fully recognized as being so, yet.

First, what it is?

Viractuality is a theory that strives to see, understand, and create interfaces between the technological and the biological. The basis of the viractual conception is that virtual producing computer technology has become a noteworthy means for making and understanding contemporary life (and thus art). And that this virtual production – a digital production that has been going on for a long time now - brings artists to a place of paradox where one finds increasingly the emerging of the computed (the virtual) with the uncomputed corporeal (the actual). This fusion motif - which tends to contradict some central techno clichés of our time - is what I call the *viractual*. It is the poetic welding of fusion/paradox that accounts for much of the potency and trans portative agency of the theory - and the art that it produces.

A key influence in the formation of my theory of viractuality was Gilles Deleuze's consideration of Spinoza - the 17th century philosopher who merged mind and matter into one material. Moreover, it is a concept close to that of augmented reality, which is the use of transparent displays worn as see-through glasses on which computer data is projected and layered.

Digitization is a key metaphor for viractuality in the sense that it is the elementary translating procedure today. But the viractual recognizes and uses the power of digitization while being culturally aware of the glamorous values of monumentality and permanency - qualities that can be found in some previous compelling analog art that grounded itself in the spiritual value of beauty.

For me, viractualism signals a new emerging sensibility respecting the integration of certain aspects of science, technology, myth and consciousness – an aesthetic consciousness struggling to attend to the prevailing contemporary spirit of our age in which everything, everywhere, all at once is connected in a rhizomatic web of transmission. But the lurking viractual realm is also a political-spiritual *chaosmos* in the sense that new forms of order may emerge in such a way that any form of order is only temporary and provisional. Within viractual creation and understanding, all signs are subject to boundlessly inverted semiosis - which is to say that they are translatable into other signs. Here, of course, it is possible to find resonances and affinities between formal and conceptual opposites. Hence, I wish to suggest that the term and concept viractual (and *viractualism* or *viractuality*) maybe helpful in defining our now third-fused inter-spatiality reality – a reality forged from the meeting of the virtual and the actual.

Now, what it means?

The history of art and the history of technology are often marked by ruptures. Most histories overlook moments where deep fusion occurs, as I see happening now with viractuality. Perhaps another temporal model for cultural consciousness is needed. Something other than the majestic forward and upward thrusting model of evolution. Something more humbly folded in on itself (as Deleuze suggests). Or perhaps something even more insinuatingly penetrating – as in a viral-host model. I have chosen the viral model – so let us now consider the activities of the viractual as a surge of emergent and embedded critical consciousness that offers us a formal clarity true to our glorious age.

After a long period of temporal disjunctions following the demise of the modernist project and the excessive abuses of the post-modernist non-project; I wish to now suggest that a new clarifying paradigm has emerged based not, however, on the ideals of the raw, the pure or the reduced - but rather on the internal tic-tic-tic bomb time of the embedded and patient viral attack. So I am suggesting here a seething project of critique within critique that re-energizes the broken gaps of temporal displacement that followed the demise of modernism and the appearance of now listless – super fragmented – irresponsible – glut of post-modern de-construction.

When looking at cultural production through the paradigm of the viral viractual, many former binary oppositions fail to function in a stable way - and start to pulse – transfusing consciousness. Most basically, even the definitions of life and death are destroyed by this model; as a biological virus is precisely neither alive nor not-alive – as it depends for its existence totally on its host's viability. The seeing-power of the host/parasite model alone must not escape us. A virus cannot – and does not – exist alone. It exists solely by entering in and coupling. So when we add the once binary definitions of virtual and actual into the voluptuous viral model of existence - and observe how they interact - a form of both/and fusion difference appears dominant within the scope of the viractual lens.

What I find exciting about this viral viractuality is the tendency here to discover and produce stuttering, nervous discrepancies between art's internal theoretical and external manufacturing mechanisms. For example, the instantaneous reading of reduced modernist form – also typical of pop art form – is problematized by buried (often cryptic) fugitive qualities of omnijective informational de-materiality. Unsustainable forms of opposition that are exploded by the viral viractual time bomb are: the mind-body dualism typical of the western philosophical tradition, thus the once held opposition between the physical and the conceptual, reality and representation, nature and culture, presence and potentiality, and the (most central to my artistic production) still and the moving. A clear enthusiasm for post-humanist metamorphosis is evident here, where the interchange between one body and another dominates.

Other now exploded ruptures include: the classical and romantic, repose and energy, carnality and spirituality, organization and vigor, simplicity and complexity, smooth and rough, clarity and chaos, restraint and effusion, sparseness and abundance, abstraction and specificity, stability and stress, composure and imbalance, plan and chance.

So viral-viractuality means cultivating another form of grandeur more concerned with inter-related passage than avant-garde rupture. Its leitmotiv is an interest in seductive infiltrations. Yet I believe it still can be said that viral-viractuality is revolutionary in that it surfs the wake of the digital revolution while, in my case, participating in the aesthetics

of glitch and the art of noise. But it is revolutionary in a new non-ruptured sense (what a dreaded sense of stress waiting for a rupture that may or may never come) as it uses an inner-outer confusion (or double sense writ grand) that is not clearly obvious on first-take by design. Yet it is non-all inclusive, as its strategy clearly has no interest in art that is without compelling poetic narrative, mechanical, design, decorative or ornamental. Rather, it is interested in fabricating unique artificial objects and experiences of sensitivity via conflation. Here I offer, as example, my conflation of the painterly glazing tradition with genetic programming, where a very intense analog-digital difference is confronted and addressed in both directions.

For anyone unfamiliar with genetic programming, briefly, it is a technique for writing code in a computer program based on artificial intelligence that uses an algorithm-based method that takes its programming cues from biology. In my case, from the biology of the virus. Indeed, for me, bio-tech genetic programming as applied to the traditions of painting and art music is so important to the ideas of viractuality that it may be said to be emblematic of it. This because it represents the seminal function of viractuality: that activity that occurs between the wild real-time and the captured archived.

Again, my interest is not in denying differences here between the two modes, but in investigating how these two models may interact in new ways as we pay attention to the direction of light as it applies to display. Cyborgian computer-assisted forms of culture and social activity (keep in mind that around 75% of stock trades are now made automatically by computers using algorithms) raises important issues of scale, materiality, and intention. But in viractuality, energetic connections *within* competing forms and forces are relished. Thus the penetrating viractual lends us a sense of new beginnings, albeit absent the rush of radical rupture. It is an idea of viral temporal interruption aligned with the haunting quality of the phantasmagorical – and that is what lends it its sense of authenticity in our age of de-materialized informational codes.